



# **HANDLING VIOLENCE AT HOME AS A BYSTANDER**

## **USING THIS GUIDE**

**This guide aims to explain what one may do as a bystander while witnessing violence at home. All information presented here is purely advisory. Readers are advised to use their discretion in determining whether a particular course of action may have unintended consequences.**

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## **VIOLENCE AT HOME**

Violence at home can range from emotional, verbal, and psychological, to physical and even sexual violence. Violence may be one of two kinds: behavioral and situational.

Violence is not limited to overt and outright manifestations: in some instances, there is a “continuum” or a sequence of events that eventually culminates in outright violence. This means, it could start with a burst of anger, or a change in expression, or a change in body language, or even a conversation expressing anger. If this is not immediately addressed or defused, it can “escalate” or increase, meaning that the anger or aggressive behavior may slowly grow and turn into an outward expression of violence.

## **SITUATIONAL VIOLENCE**

Situational violence is when an individual is triggered by something and lashes out: they may ordinarily not be angry or violent in nature, but may still turn out to be so in certain situations because of certain triggers.

## **BEHAVIORAL VIOLENCE**

Behavioral violence is often what we call domestic violence, intimate partner violence, or homebound violence. Being in a relationship of any sort in a family setting does not mean that an individual can be targeted with violence. Such behavior is harmful and can have long-term consequences. Behavioral violence often operates in a setting involving power - where the person committing such violence uses their power against the person they target.



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# DE-ESCALATING VIOLENCE AT HOME AS A BYSTANDER

## EDUCATE YOURSELF

The first step is to prepare yourself well in advance. As someone witnessing an incident, you yourself may be triggered, and may freeze, flee, or fight. It can be difficult to witness violence, especially when loved ones are involved. It is important to acknowledge your potential reactions and to educate yourself on what to do in such situations, so that you develop a working understanding of what to do, how to do it, and where you can get help to implement it, if you need to. Read online, have conversations with friends and trusted acquaintances, and equip yourself with information on the key concepts around intervention.

## BE VIGILANT

Watch out for signs around you. Observe the continuum of behaviors and see if a matter is likely to escalate: but do not wait for it to escalate to a point of no return, intervene early enough to avoid greater harm. In such situations, oftentimes, the key things to watch out for are body language, verbal language, gestures and actions, and victim behavior. The violence is what the victim feels: and how they react can also determine whether an event is violent or not.





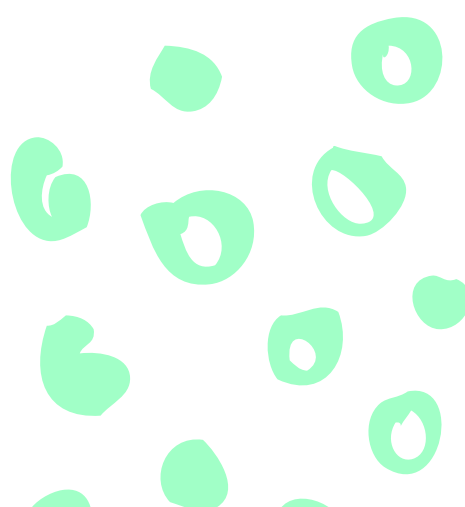

## **INTERVENE IF NEEDED**

Intervene if the situation needs it, by either distracting, disrupting, delayed intervention, delegating, or by getting into the situation directly. Distracting involves drawing the attention of the abuser and divert the focus away from the violent act so the survivor has time to get away. Disrupting is to break up the situation and defuse it. Delaying your intervention is to support the survivor after the incident takes place. Delegating involves calling on someone else to help intervene, like the police or another relative. Getting into the situation directly involves insert yourself in the situation and to take on the abuser or perpetrator.



## **DE-ESCALATE**

De-escalation simply means to reduce the intensity of a conflict or a potentially violent situation. It simply involves intervening to either keep the parties away from each other, or to get them to calm down, or to reduce the negative charge around the conflict in order to bring them to engage peacefully, calmly, or perhaps even at a later time.





# THINGS TO REMEMBER

When you get into the situation, start from a place where you are calm within. If you yourself are upset, you might react rather than respond, and that may escalate the situation. Take deep breaths, and use a gentle, low voice, instead of a high pitched one.

Try to draw the target away, if possible - and if it is not, try to draw the abusive person away. This depends entirely on how the situation is poised, which of them you are able to handle at the moment, and how close they are to the exit.

The abusive or violent person is likely to either push you away, or insult you, or even possibly tell you to get away or mind your business. Do not get defensive even if they aim insults at you. Focus on your larger goal, which is to intervene.

If there is another family member around, enjoin their support to keep the survivor or perpetrator occupied / engage with the survivor, while you keep the other occupied / engage with the other. Use this time to have an open dialogue.

Be aware of your surroundings: What is this room filled with? Who else is around? What objects are within grabbing and accessible distance? What are the exits and entries into the room like? Are you, the survivor, or the abusive person trapped?

If you are speaking with the perpetrator, clarify that what is happening is not okay and can have lasting consequences, and ask them if they would be willing to change their behaviors, if they will be open to getting help to do so. If you are speaking with the survivor, listen to them, give them water and/or first aid as applicable, and follow their lead - survivors have a right of agency that they are entitled to express.

Be non-threatening, calm, and self-assured on the outside, at least. Since the situation needs to be defused, it is important that you do not become another angry or violent actor in the situation.





# CARING FOR YOURSELF

To intervene or to de-escalate a situation of violence, start from a place where you prioritize your safety, and understand that what you are about to do will not cause you and the targeted individual more harm. This means that you should focus both on knowing how to intervene and on staying safe.

Understand where you are, and where the violence is taking place. Be aware of the spatial layout, where the exits are, how big or small the room is, and what objects are within the room. This can help you understand whether it is safe to intervene and either take the person being targeted away, or lead the perpetrator away, or if it may be a bit dangerous because of how they are positioned.

Identify whether you are personally feeling triggered. Intervening in such a situation is best avoided: instead, you can take a step back and either delegate to someone else, or even step away from the situation and alert extended family or relatives if it is too much to do on your own.

Try a simple breathing process that can help you intervene through this. Take deep breaths and be deliberate in your movements. Speak in a soft, but firm voice, and keep your breathing going. The moment you feel it going shallow or short, pause, breathe deeply and continue.






# THINGS TO REMEMBER




Another useful way to keep yourself safe is to either rely on a friend or a trusted relative to share all that is happening and to draw emotional support from them - and if you so feel inclined, you may also ask them for objective advice about the situation. This is especially important when you are dealing with a lot on your own and have to do all the heavy hauling in difficult times.




Finally, when you feel challenged in a situation, try this really cool technique from cognitive behavior therapy, called 5-4-3-2-1: 5:

- 5: Acknowledge FIVE things you see around you.
- 4: Acknowledge FOUR things you can touch around you.
- 3: Acknowledge THREE things you hear.
- 2: Acknowledge TWO things you can smell.
- 1: Acknowledge ONE thing you can taste.

Doing this in your mind can help you reorient yourself, focus on the here and the now, and prioritize your concentration on all that is happening in the here and now.









# **WHAT IF YOU CAN'T DE- ESCALATE A SITUATION?**

It is important to be realistic and establish and pursue expectations that align with the practical, ground reality. It is not always possible to intervene and de-escalate a situation, no matter how prepared you may be.



It can also, in some instances, backfire or put you in a situation of difficulty. In such situations, especially during times like these where we're living under lockdown, it can be difficult to identify ways to de-escalate situations.

In such scenarios, relying on the police or helplines that are functioning with mobility passes and shelter spaces, or even on trusted extended family and friends can be useful. This is especially important in the case of repeated instances of violence, or where there is behavioral violence.







# PREVENTING RECURRENCE

In some cases, especially those that involve repeated behavioral violence in the home, repetition of instances is possible. The nature of violence may change, but it may still continue. To avert such cases, you may draw up a safety plan, and identify all those whose help you may need to execute it.

This safety plan could look like this:

Identify safe spaces and resources. Draw up a list of helplines that are functional, and reach out when needed.

Change or temporarily avoid using original contact details after leaving. Use apps to identify callers and screen numbers you might want to avoid.

Reach out to a helpline or to the police and seek out their support if the situation escalates beyond any chance of de-escalation.

In some cities where courts can be accessed, a restraining order can be obtained and the abusive individual can be removed from the home and shifted out.

If you have a restraining order, keep a certified copy of it with you at all times and inform people around you.

Tell people you trust about the situation and request / frame the exact nature of support you need from them.